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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, students in public schools, colleges, and universities are exposed to United States history and literature via commercial and cable television and the motion picture industry. If students are going to use videotapes of historical and literature-based films as short cuts to learning, then faculty are obligated to structure videotapes into the curriculum and classroom experience to teach students how to intelligently evaluate what they are watching and to compare the visual with the originally published work. In teaching, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter," students should be encouraged to read the book and watch the film and then write a research paper in which they: (1) read articles about the movie; (2) identify places in the film and the book that contradict each other; (3) write a comparison and contrast paper that will explain the significance of these differences and how they will change the meaning of the original work; (4) conduct research to explain why the director/script writers made these changes; (5) conduct research to determine whether the book and film accurately portray the historical period; and (6) analyze how the alteration of history or literature by the film affects the public view. By undertaking these activities, students will develop such skills as how to use library references; organize research material; write paragraphs and introductions; document information; distinguish between primary and secondary sources; interpret historical documents; compile bibliographies; and distinguish between fact, fiction, and different works of fictions. Contains 19 references. (HAA)

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LITERATURE, HISTORY, FILM, SAM MALONE, AND THE RESEARCH PAPER

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"Cheers," the popular television series starring Ted Danson as Sam Malone and Shelley Long as Diane Chambers, continues to delight audiences in syndication. One particular "Cheers" episode reminded me of how some of my history students think about and approach the study of my discipline.

In this episode bartender Sam Malone continues his approach-avoidance relationship with pseudo-intellectual barmaid Diane Chambers. Diane, the perpetual college student, is dating a recent Ph.D. graduate in Russian Literature who wrote a dissertation on Tolstoy's War and Peace. Frustrated by Diane's bragging about her new boyfriend's academic accomplishments, a jealous Sam Malone connives his way into joining Diane and her date for dinner. Determined that he, too, can be as intellectual as Diane's new boyfriend (or at least as intellectual as Diane), Sam spends a week in his office reading War and Peace. The night of the long awaited dinner date arrives, but poor Sammy is thwarted in his attempt to show his budding intellectualism because Diane's date doesn't want to talk about Tolstoy. He is sick of Tolstoy, quite naturally, because War and Peace was his dissertation topic. A dejected Sammy returns to the bar seeking solace from his menagerie of barstooled "lounge lizards" when that barroom Buddha, Norm Peterson, asks Sam to confirm that he really spent an entire week reading War and

Peace. When Sammy says yes, Norm replies, "Didn't they make that into a movie?" Stopped dead in his tracks by Norm's question, Malone bops his head (as in a V-8 commercial) and moans "I spent a week reading a book that I could have watched in two hours!!"

Unfortunately, Sam Malone's remarks are typical of an increasing number of students in this age of film and television. More students in public schools, colleges, and universities are exposed to United States history and literature via commercial and cable television and the motion picture industry than ever before. In 1995 Merchant and Ivory produced "Jefferson in Paris" which purports that Thomas Jefferson had an intimate relationship with a slave and fathered her children even though there is no historical documentation to support the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings affair. Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility also debuted as films in 1995. Critics claim that Roland Joffe's interpretation of The Scarlet Letter bore no resemblance to Hawthorne's book, but Emma Thompson's screenplay was acclaimed for being faithful to Austen's novel.

Videotaped works of fiction and nonfiction are replacing Masterplots and Cliff Notes as the short cuts to writing book reviews and research papers. If students are going to use videotapes as short cuts to learning then faculty are obligated to structure videotapes into the curriculum and classroom experience and to teach students how to intelligently evaluate what they are watching and to compare the visual with the originally published work. The accuracy and interpretation of United States history and

literature by the film media is critically important because television and film viewers may not read about the historical events and the people portrayed on celluloid. Too often the television and film viewer accepts the producer/director's versions of events and personality interpretation. Students must learn to distinguish between published and film versions of history and literature. Therefore, the substance of this presentation is to focus on one film example, The Scarlet Letter, to develop research and writing skills, improve critical and analytical thinking, and encourage cooperative teaching of the research paper between History and English departments.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a descendant of Puritan ministers, recreated the world of his ancestors in The Scarlet Letter. However, I am not convinced that the current film carrying the Hawthorne title is either accurate or a good interpretation. Even the film's director, Roland Joffe, in the opening credits says the film is "loosely based on" Hawthorne's original. If The Scarlet Letter were assigned reading in either a United States history or literature course, it would be very easy to spot who read Hawthorne's book or selected the "Sam Malone method" and watched the film version. Does the book review and/or research paper submitted by the student talk about a "red bird of lust," Reverend Dimmesdale's nude swim, Hester and Arthur's wild horseback ride to church, and Hester's nude bathing? If so, the student didn't read the book! Do Puritan women sit around gossiping, is Chillingsworth dancing about with a disemboweled deer on his head, are Hester and

Arthur romping in the hay? Not in the book! Does Hester give birth to Pearl in prison, use a gun to chase a rapist, encourage lust in a drummer boy, and does Chillingsworth hang himself so Arthur, Hester, and Pearl get to live "happily ever after?" Then, the student didn't read the novel. If all of the above listed elements are found in a student's book review or research paper on The Scarlet Letter, give the student the "Sammy" award for faking the paper.

What I suggest is that you encourage students to read Hawthorne's original and watch the movie. Then, ask students to write a research paper in which they will do the following:

1. Search for and read articles about the movie "The Scarlet Letter" and Hawthorne's book The Scarlet Letter.
2. Ask students to identify at least five places in the film that contradict or are strikingly different from Hawthorne's book.
3. Let students use the research paper as the means to develop a good comparison and contrast paper that will explain the significance of these differences and how they will change the meaning of the original work.
4. Ask students to conduct sufficient research to explain why the director/script writers made these changes?
5. Encourage students to include in their research whether or not both the book and film accurately portray the historical period.
6. Tell students to conclude by analyzing how the alteration of history or literature by film affects the public view.

When students undertake this adventure of "sleuthing," each student develops skills and tools that emphasize writing and research and critical and analytical thinking. These skills and tools include:

1. How to utilize library reference and open stack resources for background research.
2. How to organize research material.
3. How to write a paragraph.
4. How to write an introduction.
5. How to document information.
6. How to distinguish between primary and secondary sources.
7. How to interpret historical documents.
8. How to compile a bibliography.
9. How to conduct oral interviews.
10. How to distinguish between fact and fiction and fiction and fiction.
11. How to write conclusions.
12. How to organize and write a research paper (items 1-11).

When I teach United States history from the Civil War to the present, I include the films "Dances with Wolves," "The Wind and the Lion," "The Long Walk Home," "JFK," and "Malcolm X." For each film I have developed study guides to focus the student's viewing, otherwise, they might miss important points, and bibliographies to direct students to credible sources for research on the film's subject. It is important for students to learn that each generation may rewrite the history of the past in the context of the social conditions in which they grew up. I want students to

distinguish between film treatments and historical accuracy. I want students to ask these important questions:

1. How would an historian/novelist approach making this film?
2. How does history function in these recreated worlds of fact or fiction?
3. Is the history accurate?
4. Does this film tell us more about present concerns than the past in which the film is set?
5. Is there a linkage between past events and present circumstances or is the present wrongly inserted into the concerns of the past?
6. What meaning does this book and/or film give to history or literature?

Should we let Oliver Stone, burdened by his own Vietnam War experiences and his belief of government corruption, visually convince us that Lyndon Johnson and the industrial-military complex killed JFK? Do we let Spike Lee interpret Malcolm X in such a way that all of the important women in Malcolm X's life loose their roles in shaping this man? Do we allow Oliver Stone's obsession with conspiracy convince us that Richard Nixon was involved in a plot with Texas businessmen against John Kennedy? Today, libraries loan videos. Are books falling into disfavor because they are perceived as a less attractive literary form? Are lending rates for video stores outpacing libraries'?

I was and remain an ardent fan of "Cheers." I continue to laugh at the interplay between Ted Danson and Shelley Long whose

"Sam" and "Diane" characters are correctly hilarious on television. However, matriculating a classroom of "Sam Malones" and "Diane Chambers" is not something to laugh at! If the teachers of history and literature ignore film, they remove themselves from the public debate about the past. Rather than be manipulated by film, academics must increase their celluloid involvement in the classroom or face the potential loss of educational control over their own disciplines.

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